DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 210 CS 212 837

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TITLE Multiple Realities and Multiple Voices in Ethnographic Texts.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Experimenter Characteristics; Higher Education; *Language Role; *Philosophy; Researchers; Undergraduate Students; *Writing (Composition); Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS Collaborative Writing; Naturalistic Research; Philosophical Research; *Research Teams; *Teacher Researchers

ABSTRACT

Two college educators, one a philosophy teacher, the other, a composition teacher, undertook a naturalistic study of students' initiation in an introduction to philosophy course. The philosophy teacher found it difficult to articulate his disciplinary ways of knowing, and both researchers had trouble identifying their tacitly held views of disciplinary initiation. Early joint efforts to compose an introduction to a journal article on the project highlighted differences between the researchers' disciplines. Gradually, through reading and interaction, the pair began to take on each other's languages. Eventually, the researchers agreed to divide the work into two parts: (1) the philosophy teacher collected and analyzed data from his classroom community; and (2) the composition teacher retained a focus on student writing. Research was reported in a heteroglossic form, with each researcher contributing in his or her own words and style of expression. In a final report, the introduction, methods, and discussion section were jointly written. In the results section, the philosophy teacher told his classroom story, the composition teacher focused on the writings of two students, and the researchers concluded with a discussion of their collaboration. Publication of the article in a recognized journal may be a step toward recognition of new forms of academic expression. (SG)

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Lucille McCarthy
4C's - Talk, Mar. 1991

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Multiple Realities and Multiple Voices in Ethnographic Texts

A year and a half ago, in the fall of 1989, Steve Fishman and I agreed to collaborate in a naturalistic study of students' initiation in his Introduction to Philosophy classroom. Steve is here today as our panel's respondent. Although we live in different states--Steve teaches in North Carolina and I teach English in Maryland--we decided to go ahead, Steve motivated to improve his teaching, and I to try out a collaborative project in which I could share equal authority with a discipline-based teacher. I'd observed other such teacher-researcher pairs and knew that while their differences could produce exciting results, they also could test the researchers' openness and ability to share control. In fact, I'd heard researchers compare these collaborations to marriage, saying that the ones that survived did so because the partners had learned to respect their differences, while at the same time creating a common language. In my presentation this morning, I want to describe Steve's and my struggles to find such a language. Specifically, I will detail how we worked to create a textual form for our research report that would preserve our differences, honor both our voices, and empower us equally.

First, however, let me set Steve's and my struggle for new textual form in a larger context. In the last ten years naturalistic researchers in composition have argued that scientific methods, where a detached researcher aims for time- and context-free generalizations, are

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incapable of fully accounting for such a complex social phenonemon as writing. Naturalistic researchers aim, rather, for insights into particular situations, assuming that reality is constructed by participants in diverse ways. These naturalists' arguments have been heard in composition studies and now naturalistic research is an accepted alternative to scientific paradigm research. However, what has not yet been established are alternative written forms in which to report naturalistic research. So far, naturalistic research in our field has been reported in quasi-scientific ways, with the researcher staying out of the text, the informants' voices heard only when quoted or paraphrased by the researcher, and the piece itself stuctured to conform to the scientific conventions of the APA style. Such reports have been described as "top-down, outside-in" representations, and Linda Brodkey observes that they appear to be narrated by the research methods rather than by the researcher and her informants.

Therefore, what naturalistic researchers must now develop is alternative textual conventions which are consistent with naturalistic assumptions. We must, that is, develop forms which foreground the multiple realities of researcher and informants, describe their negotiations and mutual influence, and, most important, represent all of their voices. Anthropologist James Clifford calls such texts polyphonic or heteroglossic, and it is just such a report that Steve and I ultimately created.

Let me now return to Steve's and my story, that is, to our struggles to articulate our differences, share authority, and develop an alternative textual form that honored both our voices. The event I'll

begin with shows, first, how hard it was for us to articulate our differences because so much of what we know is tacit, and second, how hard it was for us to make each other's way of knowing our own. This event occurred in early January, 1990, a little more than a year ago, when Steve and I first exchanged drafts of possible introductions to our article.

All fall we had been collecting data from students and conversing frequently, I questioning Steve in various ways about what constituted philosophy in his classroom and what counted as successful student writing there. At one point I asked him point-blank: "What is philosophy anyway?" He replied, "I'm not sure I know. In any case I don't care so much that my students learn the conventions of philosophy as I do that they learn to celebrate their own voices, learn that they have beliefs and values that are worth exploring." "But, Steve," I responded, "I know you're working with students' own conflicts and questions, but you're using philosophic methods on them. I can hear that your methods are different from those of literary criticism or business or biology."

Just as it was hard from Steve at first to articulate his disciplinary ways of knowing, so was it hard for both of us to articulate our tacitly held views of disciplinary initiation. What helped us eventually clarify our views was common reading we did. Steve sent me sections fom the Encyclopedia of Philosophy and various textbooks as well as passages from philosophers he admired, such as John Dewey, and we discussed these. I sent him David Bartholomae's article, "Inventing the University," to explain my view that students must learn to speak the language of the professor, and he shot back with sections from Peter

Elbow's work, saying that good writing of any sort must come out of personal commitment. We were, during the fall of 1989, working to articulate our positions, identify our disagreements, and create a common langauge for talking about them. I was getting his perspective, I thought, and he mine.

I should have been alerted that this was not going to be so easy when I heard Steve's response to a manuscript I sent him in December. The manuscript reported a collaborative, co-authored study like our own, and it seemed fine to me, a naturalistic study in which the researcher, after a careful explanation of his methods, described the teacher's ways of knowing and teaching. But Steve hated it. "This sounds like a treaty," he said, "Where are the conflicts? They've all been leveled. Sure, I hear the teacher's voice, but only as quoted by the researcher. And why all this talk about methods?"

Nonetheless, in early January of a year ago we thought we could speak for each other and agreed we'd each draft an introduction to our article, which we hoped to place in a composition journal. Steve's 8-page draft arrived at my house first, and I said to myself after reading it, "Oh no, this will never get published." It was a beautifully written narrative that captured our voices and our conflicts, but didn't fill out the methods or the issues, nor did it set the piece in the ongoing disciplinary conversation.

And Steve's objections to my 12-page draft echoed those he'd made to the manuscript I'd sent him the month before. He told me as tactfully as he could that I had not represented his views of writing fairly and that he found my tone too "sciency." I was, he said, keeping myself too

much outside the piece, playing too much the role of white-coated, objective researcher. By contrast, in our report, he said, he would be fully exposed. "Besides," he said, "you're not neutral. You influenced my teaching in the fall." And then Steve raised the issue of authority, saying that by citing my own work and referring to myself by my last name and to him by his first, I was "making an implicit statement of who's in charge and whose voice counts."

At that point, I figured our being in different states wasn't such a bad thing, and I suppose each of us was considering a quiet divorce. However, neither of us mentioned it, and this exchange did help us to further identify our differences. What we did not yet have, however, was a satisfactory textual form for dealing with them. So we let the introduction go for the time being. It was the only part of the article we thought we'd have to agree on. Steve, we had planned, would write a teaching autobiography, a personal narrative describing his own difficult initiation into philosophy. And I would construct the stories of several students' writing during their initiation in Steve's class, stories based on the data we'd collected in the fall.

If the three months before January of a year ago were characterized by attempts to articulate our positions and by my questioning of Steve and trying on his language, during the next three months it was Steve's turn. He read deeply in composition and ethnography, pieces I sent him as well as articles he found on his own. And Steve's questioning influenced my data analysis just as my questioning the semester before had influenced his teaching. Though between January and March we were working separately, I shared data with

Steve and frequently described to him the interpretations I was constructing. He often replied, "I see it a little differently," and his interpretations helped me rethink and at times reshape, my own. This three month period, in which we switched roles and continued to try out each others' language was a productive one for us. In late February Steve told me he'd surprised himself when, in a conversation with his dean about hiring, he'd used the word "triangulation," and I reported I'd just heard myself quote John Dewey to a colleague in English. This gradual taking on of each other's languages led to the second event I want to tell you about.

This event, which occurred in March of last year, helped us deal with the authority issue Steve had raised in January. At the 4C's convention we participated in an Ethnography workshop, and there I gave a presentation in which I described Steve as my co-researcher. Afterward, he shocked me by saying, "I still don't feel like we're co-researchers." He told me that he wanted to deal directly with data, not just comment on my interpretations of it. After having listened to my taped interviews with students and having read transcripts of my interviews with him, he was, as he put it, suffering from "data envy." Furthermore, he was realizing that his own questions were not the same as mine. He was not so much interested in student writing as he was in classroom discussion--why were some classes marked by active student participation whereas others were silent? So we decided that Steve would, on his own, collect and analyze data. ~~In~~ Last May, after classes were finished, Steve interviewed 5 spring semester students, imitating the methods I'd used in interviews with five fall semester students. When he sent me the tapes,

I was impressed and suggested a new plan for our research together. Again, we would divide our report into two parts, but this time Steve would take responsibility for describing and analyzing his classroom community while I would retain my focus on student writing. Furthermore, we agreed we would report our research in a heteroglossic form in which each of us could speak for ourselves. This decision was crucial for settling our conflicts over authority. Not only were we now both responsible for data collection and for answering our own questions, we had each agreed to write our own findings.

So all last summer Steve worked with his data to construct findings about how his students learned during class discussion, and I worked with my data to construct the stories of two students' writing experiences in his class. Although we worked separately, we conversed and exchanged letters frequently, focussing on similar themes in both sets of data, namely the ways students learned through conflict in what we were calling boundary conversations. Last September we decided to write our co-authored, heteroglossic report for the journal Research in the Teaching of English. RTE gave us the audience we wanted and put no page limits on manuscript length. However, we were acutely aware that RTE's 4-part text form--Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion--is grounded in scientific rather than naturalistic assumptions. However, Steve, who is a fiction writer as well as philosopher, compared the 4-part RTE structure to a sonata form, and convinced me that it was a form we could, quote, "dance within." So from last September until 3 weeks ago, we danced our multi-voiced dance within the RTE form. Let me tell you what our article ended up looking like.

Our Introduction, Methods, and Discussion sections are co-authored by the two of us. Since the time of our failed competition to write separate introductions nine months earlier, we had articulated our differences, equalized authority, and developed a common language. Thus we were able, last fall, to write these three sections together, at times one of us drafting first and the other refining, at other times, composing together. As we composed the Discussion section last November, Steve held the pencil. However, we agree that writing the article's final section was a cooperative affair that neither of us could have done alone.

In our article's Introduction we use several familiar textual gestures to establish our authority in RTE terms. We cite numerous published works to contextualize our study, and then we create a gap in that literature which we promise that our findings will fill. However, two parts of our Introduction warn readers to expect something different from a scientific, objectified account. In our first paragraph we appear to be rolling the credits of a play or movie, introducing what we call our four principal characters, Steve and me and two students, and explaining our various motives for participating. The second introductory signal we send readers is our announcement that our study has a central image: learning occurs, we say, in boundary conversations. With these two moves, we are, to use Geertz's terms, preparing readers for "author-saturated" as well as "author-evacuated" prose, for narrative as well as analysis.

In our second section, Methods, I see now in retrospect, we did some of the same double dance we did in the Introduction. We again

authorize ourselves in RTE terms by showing that we employ a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, by referring to such concepts as triangulation and trustworthiness, and by citing previous work. In addition, we argue in the Methods section for new textual forms for naturalistic research, an argument we again buttress with numerous citations. Thus, in both our Introduction and Methods sections we were working, I now see, to get our feet in the door. In these first two sections we hoped to authorize our unorthodox third section - Results.

In our Results section we tell three stories in three distinct voices. Steve begins with his classroom story, a piece whose title is that of a short story rather than an research report. He calls it, "When Upside Down is Rightside Up." He first describes his goals for his students' learning and his view of philosophy. He then narrates one particular class discussion, essentially asking the reader to relive it with him in order to experience our finding that students learn through conflict. Steve concludes his story by focusing on himself and what he learned from this research. Although Steve's account of his class discussion is based on data he collected, he refers only infrequently to them. Rather, he authorizes his account by the persona he constructs for himself--a caring teacher willing to examine his practices and admit his mistakes--and by the story itself.

My piece follows Steve's in the Results section and tells the stories of two students writing in his class. My title, unlike Steve's, is, I see in retrospect, that of a somewhat unimaginative composition researcher: I call my piece "Two Students Writing in Introduction to Philosophy." And, unlike Steve, I position myself outside my story,

coming into the text only occasionally in the role of interviewer. Because I wrote my piece after Steve wrote his, I think I may have been trying to compensate for Steve's author-saturated story of lived experience. Hardly a paragraph goes by that I don't mention the data source or analytic method that grounds my interpretation, and I frequently cite other work that corroborates or extends my own. Just as during Steve's writing I pleaded with him, "Can't you mention a data source just once in a while?", during my writing, Steve asked "Do you have to keep interrupting the students' stories with those citations?" He said, "It's like you're saying, 'And then the wolf quietly opened the door and went into grandma's bedroom. For other discussions of grandmas see so and so.'"

If in my piece I am more the scientific outsider than Steve was in his, in the third part of our Results section we are both stage center. Here we coauthor the story of our research collaboration in a narrative we entitle, "The Researchers' Boundary Conversation." We show our struggles to articulate our tacit assumptions and to share authority, much as I've just now described to you. We also show our conflicts and negotiations about methods and interpretations, and our mutual influence throughout the project. And as if this were not dancing far enough at the edges of RTE form, our account, in addition to being autobiographical, is also self-parodying.

We place the story of our collaboration in the Results section because Steve's and my learning in boundary conversations during our year and a half of research mirrors the learning we describe in Steve's students. However, what our research story also does is fill out the

Methods section. We show how our field work--always a messy biographical affair--was converted into the two well-ordered stories we just presented. In our case our field work included discovering that giving the teacher his voice meant more than giving him a few pages to tell his story and more than my teaching him how to talk like me. Rather, it meant granting him his own questions and agenda, his own data collection and analysis, and his own rhetorical style. And, of course, granting him all this reshaped both our inquiry and our ultimate textual representation of it. In sum, Steve's and my research story is a confessional tale which shows that though we decided to tell certain stories, we might have told others had our negotiations worked out differently. We thus show that our truths are partial, constructed by annoyingly limited human beings whose motives never so much centered on finding truth as they did on improving our own teaching and research practices.

In conclusion, it was about three weeks ago that Steve and I were both pleased and relieved when the editors of Research in the Teaching of English did accept our article. Although the acceptance is, of course, good news for us personally, I think it's also good news for our field. Just three years ago, Greg Meyers suggested that it might be some time before we would see in composition studies new textual forms that call into question our yet unsure claims to academic authority. Steve's and my article's acceptance by RTE may be a step toward recognizing that the forms we've borrowed from the scientific paradigm are neither natural nor native to ethnographic inquiry. It may be a step toward appropriating and inventing forms of our own, forms that honor diversity and empower

our informants' voices.